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RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Abduction of children from northern Uganda

Report of the Secretary-General

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Introduction

1. At its fifty-fourth session, the Commission on Human Rights adopted resolution 1998/75, entitled "Abduction of children from northern Uganda", in which inter alia it commended in the strongest terms all parties involved in the abduction, torture, killing, rape, enslavement and forceful recruitment of children in northern Uganda.

2. The Secretary-General brought resolution 1998/75 to the attention of the Governments of the Sudan and Uganda by a note verbale dated of 11 November 1998. Their replies are included in the present report, which is submitted pursuant to paragraph 11 of that resolution.

SUMMARY OF THE SITUATION

3. The armed conflict in northern Uganda has lasted for 12 years, from 1986 to date, with Gulu and Kitgum districts on the border with the Sudan being the worst affected.

4. UNICEF and non-governmental sources state that since 1986 the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), an armed opposition group, has abducted up to 10,000 children, mostly 14 to 16 years old, but at times as young as 8 or 9, boys and girls alike. Between 5,000 and 8,000 children are estimated to have been abducted since 1995. The children are forced to march for days carrying military equipment and supplies to LRA camps in Uganda and southern Sudan. Many are killed on the way.

5. UNICEF states that more boys are taken than girls, as the primary reason for abduction is to use the children as soldiers. Once they have arrived at the camps, the children are taught how to use weapons and are forced to fight, both in Ugandan and Sudanese territory. Smaller children may be given chores to do and girls as young as 12 are given to commanders as "wives". Each soldier may have several such wives, and many of the children have become pregnant and have contracted sexual diseases. Children who do not perform their assigned tasks satisfactorily are beaten. Children who disobey orders are beaten or killed, and often other abducted children are forced to do the killing. Failed escape attempts are punished by death and successful attempts lead to retaliation against the relatives of the escapee.

I. INFORMATION PROVIDED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF UGANDA

6. The Government of Uganda estimates that between 6,000 and 10,000 children have been abducted over the past 10 years, the majority of then teenagers. The children are marched between 50 and 100 miles through the bush and then are moved around in the Sudan. Of those who have escaped or have been released, only one in 10 are female.

7. Government troops have been placed in affected areas to provide security and prevent abductions and forcible recruitment. The inhabitants of the villages in and around Gulu and Kitgum come into these protected areas at 6 p.m. every evening.

8. Children who have been involved in hostilities and have subsequently returned or escaped are given amnesty by the Government. In Gulu, a Counselling Centre for Children who are traumatized has been created where children are provided with food, clothes and counselling, and are reunited with their families. Many such children have been able to return to school.

9. A group of Members of Parliament has established an initiative to reach out to the LRA and the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in western Uganda, and has appealed to the donor community to provide funding. They are now setting up a non-governmental organization to bring units together to enter into dialogue with the Government.

10. A non-governmental organization, the Concerned Parents' Association, has established itself in Uganda to raise national and international awareness about the situation of these children.

11. The Government of Uganda states that, since the adoption of Commission resolution 1998/75, it has continued to encourage a political solution to the conflict, and states that it remains open to seeking bilateral negotiations with the Sudan.

II. INFORMATION PROVIDED BY THE GOVERNMENT OF THE SUDAN

12. The Government of the Sudan states that it has always stood firmly against the abduction, torture or recruitment of children as soldiers. In his address on 13 December 1998 to the African Ministerial Meeting on Refugees, Returnees and Displaced People held in Khartoum, the President of the Republic called on Africa to condemn the exploitation and involvement by rebellion movements of children in armed conflicts. He urged joint efforts to trace and free those children, reunite them with their families and spare them the agony and scourge of war.

13. UNICEF has recognized the concern and efforts of the Government of the Sudan with regard to the question of abducted children in northern Uganda, and confirmed during the fifty-fourth session of the Commission on Human Rights that the Government of the Sudan is complying with its humanitarian requirements in that abducted children are being allowed to return home.

14. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on the impact of armed conflict on children, visited the Sudan between 14 and 17 June 1998, and expressed appreciation to the Government of the Sudan for its cooperation in facilitating the release of three children abducted by Ugandan rebel groups and their repatriation to Uganda. He expressed hope for the Government's continued cooperation on the matter.

15. The Government of the Sudan has repeatedly pledged to free and facilitate the return of any children found inside Sudanese territory. The Minister of External Relations, among other high officials, conveyed to the Special Representative the strict policy adopted by the Sudan regarding recruitment of children. As regards Ugandan children, the Special Representative was informed that the Government was fully cooperating, in full transparency, with the UNICEF representative in Khartoum.

16. The Government of the Sudan states that it will continue to honour its commitments as stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and any other obligations concerning the protection, safety and welfare of the child.

III. INFORMATION PROVIDED BY THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

17. Since his appointment, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on the impact of armed conflict on children, Mr. Olara Otunnu, has sought to raise awareness of the phenomenon of abduction of children in the context of armed conflict for the purpose of serving armed groups as child soldiers and sex slaves. One of the most severe forms of brutalization of children, this phenomenon has been epitomized by the abduction of an estimated 8,000 Ugandan children, as young as 5 years of age, by the so-called Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in northern Uganda.

18. During the fifty-second session of the General Assembly, the Special Representative held two meetings in October 1997 with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Sudan, Mr. Ali Osman Taha, to discuss, inter alia, the plight of Ugandan children abducted by Ugandan armed groups and who may be held on the territory of the Sudan. The Special Representative expressed his interest in visiting the Sudan to discuss with the Sudanese authorities how the Sudan could use its position and influence to alleviate the plight of abducted children.

19. In October 1997, the Special Representative met with a delegation of Ugandan parliamentarians headed by Ms. Betty Okwir, Deputy Speaker of the Parliament of Uganda. They discussed issues concerning peace in northern Uganda, and in particular the impact of the ongoing armed conflict on generations of children. Along with the issue of abducted children, they discussed the plight of traumatized victims of rape, child-mothers, displaced, maimed or abandoned children.

20. On 10 November 1997, the staff of the Special Representative met with Ms. Angelina Acheng Atyam, Vice-Chairperson of the Concerned Parents' Association, Uganda, who provided a personal account of the fate of thousands of children abducted from northern Uganda by the LRA, including her own daughter Charlotte. The Special Representative, who was away from Headquarters, had a substantive telephone discussion with Ms. Acheng Atyam on the issue.

21. In late November 1997, a 15-year-old boy who had escaped from the LRA sought the protection of UNICEF in the southern Sudanese city of Juba. UNICEF learned subsequently of the existence of another 16 "persons of concern". In March 1998, the Government of the Sudan facilitated the repatriation by UNICEF and UNHCR of 12 Ugandan children between 12 and 17 years of age, two infants and three adults from Juba via Khartoum to Kampala. Prior to this positive and encouraging development, reported by the Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF to the Commission on Human Rights on 2 April 1998 under agenda Item 8, the Special Representative had been in close contact with UNICEF and UNHCR on this matter. He had urged the Government of the Sudan to extend its full cooperation with respect to the tracing and repatriation of Ugandan children who may be on its territory.

22. In April 1998, the Office of the Special Representative undertook a mission in the district of Gulu, northern Uganda. The mission personnel discussed with local administrative, military and medical authorities the impact of recurrent incursions into the Gulu and Kitgum districts by LRA armed groups. Their modus operandi consists of hit-and-run attacks on villages by small groups of rebels to loot, abduct children, kill and often order children to kill family members or to maim individuals. Abducted children are used to carry the booty. Ultimately they are used as combatants and sex slaves.

23. The mission visited two trauma and counselling centres in Gulu. The Gulu Support for Children Organization (GUSCO) had 200 children in residence, on average between 11 and 14 years of age. They had fled their captors, and had surrendered to or been captured by the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF), the Ugandan army. The youngest child met by the mission was 5 years old. The youngest abducted children are usually not seen again as they are not likely to survive the escape and a most dangerous and strenuous four- to seven-day walk without food and water from southern Sudan to northern Uganda. While the children, who seemed to be enjoying the full support of the Gulu community, were apparently not ostracized, it is to be noted that the psycho-social reintegration of girls, as young as 9 years of age, is more difficult in view of the sexual abuse they have suffered and the stigma attached to it. Approximately 85 per cent of girls arrive at the Centre suffering from sexually transmitted diseases.

24. The mission visited the World Vision Trauma and Counselling Centre, which had 195 children in residence. It had received since its establishment a total of 3,870 children. The World Vision Centre receives children without relatives in the vicinity of Gulu. Thus, these children do not enjoy crucial emotional support from their families and immediate communities. A major challenge for the Centre was the identification, tracing and reunification of children with their families.

25. Subsequent to the mission, the office of the Special Representative, in cooperation with the British non-governmental organization Child Advocacy International, identified a prominent psychiatrist ready to volunteer to carry out clinical work at the two trauma centres in Gulu, offer training to social workers and document cases. The fielding of the psychiatrist is being coordinated by the UNICEF Uganda office.

26. During his official visit to the Sudan between 14 and 16 June 1998, the Special Representative raised with the Sudanese authorities in Khartoum and Juba the issue of Ugandan children abducted by Ugandan rebel groups who may be held by those groups on the territory of the Sudan. In particular, he discussed this matter with the First Vice-President of the Sudan, Mr. Ali Osman Taha, the Speaker of Parliament, Mr. Hassan Turabi, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Mustafa Osman Ismail, and with the Assistant to the President and Chairman of the Southern States Coordinating Council, Mr. Riek Machar.

27. In view of substantiated reports that some Ugandan rebel groups were operating in and out of Uganda from the territory of the Sudan, the Special Representative urged the Government of the Sudan to undertake to cooperate and to use the influence it may have in the tracing, release from captivity and

repatriation of Ugandan children who may be on its territory. He made a particular appeal for the tracing and release of schoolgirls abducted on 10 October 1996 by the LRA from St. Mary's College at Aboke in northern Uganda. He also reiterated his appreciation to the Government of the Sudan for its cooperation with UNICEF and UNHCR in the repatriation of 14 Ugandan children and 3 adults in March 1998.

28. The Government of the Sudan pledged to assist on humanitarian grounds with ongoing efforts aimed at the tracing and release of children abducted from northern Uganda by Ugandan rebel groups. It indicated, however, that it was not in control of the Sudan-Uganda border area.

29. On 15 June 1998, the Special Representative visited Juba, the capital o the Bahr-el-Ghazal province, where he met in the UNICEF compound with two Ugandan boys who had been used as child soldiers by two Ugandan rebel groups operating out of the territory of the Sudan. The boys expressed the wish to return to their homes in northern Uganda. The Government of the Sudan extended its full cooperation to the Special Representative with a view to effecting the repatriation of the boys. A total of three boys were flown on 19 June 1998 to Kampala via Khartoum by UNICEF and UNHCR. They were officially handed over to the Government of Uganda and reunited with their families in northern Uganda.

30. In an address to the Security Council under the agenda item "Children and armed conflict", the Special Representative highlighted the breakdown of local value systems and the negation of codes of ethics in the conduct of warfare, such as the concept of lapir, "the cleanliness of one's claim", which traditionally governed the rules of war for the Acholi people of northern Uganda. He underlined that the current routine violation of strict injunctions, chief among them the immunity of children, women and the elderly from attack, was destroying the basis for future coexistence.

31. The Special Representative met in New York in March 1998 with Ms. Angelina Acheng Atyam, Vice-Chairperson of the Concerned Parents' Association, Uganda, to discuss the issue of abducted children in northern Uganda. He assured her that the situation of abducted children was at the forefront of his agenda and that he was actively pursuing efforts initiated b the Secretary-General to seek the release of abducted children, including the release of the schoolgirls abducted from St. Mary's College.

32. The Special Representative met on 9 June 1998 with Mr. Michel Sidibe, Representative of UNICEF in Uganda. They discussed actions that could be undertaken to address the issue of abduction of children in northern Uganda, including the psycho-social rehabilitation of children.

33. He also met in London in July 1998 with Mr. Owiny Dolo, the Ugandan Minister of State for Northern Reconstruction, and with Members of Parliament women leaders and the resident district commissioners of the Gulu and Kitgum districts, which are most severely affected by LRA attacks. The impact of th abduction of children on the family and social fabric of entire communities i northern Uganda was at the centre of the discussions.

34. The Special Representative also met in London in August 1998 with Ugandan bishops and other religious leaders to discuss the opportunity for broad-based inter-communal consultations among religious and political leaders, civil society organizations and notables. Such consultations would be aimed at the mapping of a consensual platform conducive to a lasting peace in northern Uganda.

35. He met on 1 September with Mr. Babatunde Thomas, United Nations Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative for Uganda, to discuss a prospective UNDP project to promote inter- and intra-communal consultations. Such a conference would provide a forum for Ugandan religious leaders, parliamentarians, notables, local political and administrative leaders, non-governmental organizations and associations to discuss the situation in northern Uganda, with a view to formulating a political platform conducive to the pacification of northern Uganda through participatory political processes and socio-economic rehabilitation. The Special Representative advocated that the current plight and future of children should be at the core of such a conference.

36. On 3 July 1998, the Special Representative convened in New York a meeting to review the phenomenon of child abduction in theatres of armed conflict, with a view to promoting concerted action on this alarming modus operandi. The meeting, attended by, inter alia, the former Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs in the Sudan, the Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF, the Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator and the Representative of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, reviewed the massive abduction and brutalization of Ugandan children. The meeting concluded that the Special Representative on the impact of armed conflict on children was best suited to serve as the focal point to coordinate efforts to obtain the release of children abducted by armed groups in northern Uganda.

37. The Special Representative has been promoting the concept of subregional meetings aimed at reaching understandings among concerned States and non-State entities on transborder issues. In particular, such an understanding would result in a commitment by States and non-State entities to proscribe the abduction of children. The Special Representative has been discussing the concept with, inter alia, several Governments in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region, the Organization of African Unity, UNICEF and UNHCR. He will pursue his efforts with a view to holding high-level meetings with respect to the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region in the course of 1999.

38. The Special Representative met on 30 September 1998 in New York with Mr. Mustafa Osman Ismail, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Sudan. He reiterated his appeal for the cooperation of the Government of the Sudan with respect to the tracing of Ugandan children presumably held by Ugandan armed groups on the territory of the Sudan.

39. He also informed the Minister for Foreign Affairs of his intention to pay a second visit to the Sudan, including to rebel-controlled areas of the country. Preparations are under way for this mission, which will take place early in 1999.

40. In October 1998, the Special Representative met in Brussels with Mr. Odwong J. Akwero, Member of Parliament of Uganda, and with Ms. Angelina Acheng Atyam, Vice-Chairperson of the Concerned Parents' Association, Uganda. The meeting discussed the draft legislation before the Ugandan Parliament pertaining to an amnesty for rebels with a view to promoting reconciliation and peace, and ways and means of assisting children affected by the situation in northern Uganda. Ms. Acheng Atyam provided an information update regarding the plight of the children of northern Uganda.

41. The Special Representative met again with Ms. Acheng Atyam in New York on 9 December 1998. She appealed through the Special Representative to all protagonists and to the international community to ensure that children were shielded from warfare. She stressed that peace was the only solution.

42. On 10 December 1998, the Secretary-General awarded the United Nations Human Rights Prize to Ms. Acheng Atyam, during a ceremony by the General Assembly to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

IV. INFORMATION PROVIDED BY INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL SOURCES

43. Information about the situation of abduction of children from northern Uganda was received from UNICEF, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations, the Integrated Regional Information Network for Central and Eastern Africa (IRIN), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and NGOs such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, World Vision and the Quaker United Nations office. A summary of this information follows.

44. Concerns have been expressed over conditions in the Ugandan "protected camps", which have been established to protect children and adult civilians from abduction and forcible recruitment. The conditions in these camps are said to be very bad; they are overcrowded and there is little access to adequate water and food. The camps are reportedly not very well protected and abductions and attacks by the LRA continue. The LRA has repeatedly threatened NGOs and in June 1998 NGOs and ICRC pulled out of Kitgum.

45. UNICEF reported that between November 1997 and April 1998, 14 children and 3 adults escaped from the LRA and contacted UNICEF in the southern Sudanese city of Juba. The abductees included a dozen children between the ages of 12 and 17, including a 16-year-old girl and her baby, an adult woman and her 2-year-old daughter, and two adult men. UNICEF and UNHCR formally sought, and were given, the help of the Governments of the Sudan and Uganda in facilitating the transport of the children for their return to Uganda.

46. In June 1998, five students abducted from Kichwamba Technical College in western Uganda by the ADF were reportedly killed while trying to escape. The same month, 40 girls were abducted from the St. Charles Lwanga College in Kalongo.

47. In November 1998 Uganda Radio reported that schools in six sub-counties of the Kitgum district were closed owing to fears of attacks by the LRA in the area.

48. On 15 December 1998, it was reported that over 80 children freed from the LRA by Government forces were handed over to rehabilitation agencies in Gulu. World Vision reported to IRIN that its counselling centre had received 54 of the children. They will receive psychological and nutritional help before being returned to their communities.